

The Psychology of Centering Prayer

FOR CENTURIES THE GREAT MODEL of spiritual growth in the Christian tradition has been the friendship of Christ. Friendship is a marvelous paradigm because it suggests confidence, love, and self-disclosure, all of which increase as friendliness develops into friendship and ever deepening levels of commitment. The paradigm of friendship, however, does not necessarily include the aspect of emotional illness that is so characteristic of the human condition. The friendship of Christ, of course, does include the reality of human weakness and need. One characteristic of love is that it reduces our defenses. When our defenses go down, the dark side of our personality emerges. One important aspect of a true friendship is the willingness to help each other process that material.

Here is another model that might be appropriate for our time, at least for the Western world, which has been so influenced by contemporary psychology. I call this paradigm for spiritual growth the "Divine Therapy." Therapy suggests a climate of friendship and the trust that a topnotch therapist is able to inspire, while at the same time emphasizing that we come to therapy with a variety of serious emotional or mental problems.

The human race, as a whole, is a sick species. According to the Roman Catholic tradition, only the Blessed Virgin Mary came into existence and remained emotionally undamaged. Most people are not aware of their illness or how very sick they are. They do not have an adequate diagnosis of the human condition in general or their own illness

in particular. Hence they do not reach out for the kind of assistance that they need in order to recover.

One of the great strengths of the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous is that it emphasizes how serious one's illness actually is. Participants in AA know that their lives are unmanageable and will never become manageable unless they work the twelve steps. In actual fact, most humans suffer from the serious illness that Ann Wilson Schaefer calls "the Addictive Process" — indeed, as high as 98 percent of the population in the Western world, according to some recent statistics. Personally, I have never met anyone from the other 2 percent! The addictive process as a psychological term parallels what theology in the Christian tradition calls the "consequences of original sin," only in much greater detail. The addictive process manifests itself according to circumstances and personality in one or another of the many addictions that can now be treated by various Twelve Step programs. The advantage of being an addict is that you know that you will never get well without help. Unfortunately, the average practicing Christian, because of a certain modicum of respectability, does not seem to know this. It is not until the addiction gradually gets so bad and all semblance of functionality breaks down that one finally recognizes it. The practical question for all of us is "How addicted are we?"

The consequences of original sin according to traditional theology are three: illusion, concupiscence, and weakness of will. Illusion means that although we are irresistibly programmed for boundless happiness in a way that is inherent to human nature, we do not know where true happiness is to be found. Concupiscence means that we seek happiness in the wrong places or too much happiness in the right places. And finally, if we ever reach the point of finding out where true happiness is to be found, our will is too weak to pursue it.

What is different about this teaching from the proclamation of the first step of the Twelve Step Program of AA that

"my life is unmanageable"? If one accepts the traditional doctrine of the consequences of original sin, the freedom to manage one's life is severely limited. It is on the basis of complete helplessness apart from the grace of God that the whole idea of redemption rests.

Once we reach the bottom line of the diagnosis, "my life is unmanageable," we do not have to wait until things fall completely apart to recognize the seriousness of our illness. We can start at once by taking preventive therapy designed to heal the roots of developing addictive processes before they become full blown. The gospel addresses the human condition just as it is. "Repent" — that fundamental call in the gospel to begin the healing process — means "change the direction in which you are looking for happiness." The various orientations for happiness that we brought with us from early childhood are not working. They are slowly killing us. If we respond to the invitation to repent addressed to us so lovingly by the divine physician, we can begin at once to take advantage of the Divine Therapy.

Therapy, as we saw, implies both the relationship of friendship and the relationship of healing. Reading the gospel from the perspective of contemporary psychotherapy provides us with a detailed diagnosis of the disease. Contemplative prayer and action — life under the direct influence of the Seven Gifts of the Spirit (counsel, prudence, fortitude, reverence, wisdom, understanding, knowledge) — is the gospel program for human health, wholeness, and transformation.

Many of Jesus' parables and recorded sayings are basically directed at our unconscious emotional programs for happiness, which tear us apart by ever increasing demands that cannot possibly be fulfilled. A person dominated by an emotional investment in the instinctual needs for control, esteem, or security will absorb into these magnetic energy centers every new experience and interpret it from their perspective. If it satisfies, there is temporary delight; if it frustrates, lingering distress.

How did we get hooked into these programs in the first place? This question is still under investigation in our time. The world religions have projected various creation theories to account for the human condition universally experienced as seriously flawed. Now psychology and science are making their contributions. Developmental psychologists such as Piaget, and more recently John Bradshaw, have attributed the cause to failures of parental nurturance and emotional wounding experienced in early childhood. In his book *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground* (SUNY Press, 1988) transpersonal psychologist Michael Washburn hypothesizes a repression of the sense of oneness with the source of our being — what he calls the "dynamic ground" — as the first step in the process of developing a separate self-identity — a repression that starts us off on a desperate search for happiness that cannot possibly succeed. Whatever the cause, the source of true happiness is missing from our growing-up experience. The awareness of the divine presence is true security, true affirmation, and true independence, but that reassuring presence and pervading sense of bliss is missing from everyone's developing consciousness.

Without the reassuring experience of God the world is perceived to be potentially hostile. Since the need for happiness is so fundamental and so strong, we invest at a very early age in various substitutes. Our programs for happiness seek in vain to compensate for the absence of the sense of God's presence as the developmental process proceeds. The net result of our efforts to repress emotional pain or to compensate for it is the formation of the false self. The gospel invites us to recognize that the false self is a disease that can be healed and to accept Christ as the divine physician or, in the context of this paradigm, the Divine Therapist. The healing process is primarily the work of contemplative prayer, which, along with the homework of daily life, constitutes the Divine Therapy.

Let's look at what I am calling the Divine Therapy to

see if it truly responds to the illness of the human condition and its diagnosis both theological and psychological. Let's envision a period of Centering Prayer as a take-off point and enlarge it to include several years of regular practice. Centering Prayer as it becomes habitual is dominated more and more by the contemplative gifts of the Holy Spirit: knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. When we sit down in prayer, our psychological experience is something like that depicted in Diagram 5 (remember that we are telescoping the cumulative effect of several years of practice into a single prayer period.) When we introduce the sacred word, we institute a circular motion with four major moments. The first moment is when we introduce the sacred word (or the sacred gaze or breath) as the symbol of our consent to God's presence and action within us and gently establish an attitude of waiting upon the Lord with loving attentiveness. At first there may be an experience of endless thoughts filling our awareness. When we have been practicing for several years, this normally passes fairly quickly into a deep sense of quiet, refreshment, or rest. This is the second moment in the circular movement of Centering Prayer. "Rest" is the term for a wide variety of psychological impressions such as peace, interior silence, contentment, a sense of coming home, of well-being, and most of all, of God's presence.

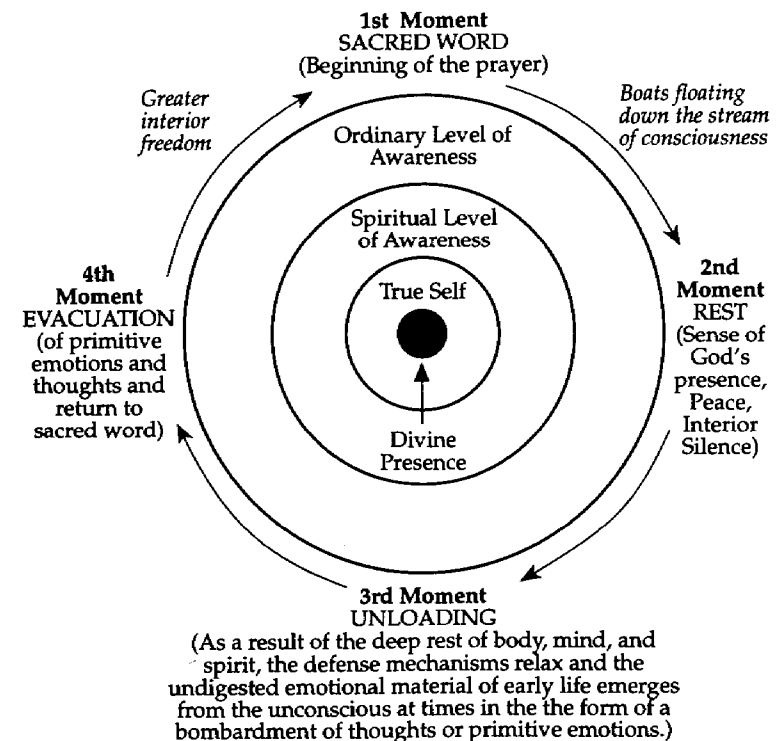
Suppose this rest is so deep that at some point during prayer there are few or no thoughts passing by. Or one has a strong sense of the presence of God. The experience of deep rest, cumulative now since we are talking about a year or two of practice, automatically causes the body to rest, and indeed to rest in a greater degree than in sleep.

The feeling of deep rest, especially when it involves a deep sense of the divine presence, leads to a kind of psychological transference with God. That is to say, God becomes the therapist in the psychoanalytic sense in which we look to a therapist for the trust and love that we did not feel we received as a child from an important other,

Diagram 5

THE FOUR "MOMENTS" OF CENTERING PRAYER

(Representing the psychological dynamics of several years of practice, but which can also be experienced in a single prayer period.)



Note: each cycle of the Four Moments begins at a level closer to the center (Divine Presence) because obstacles in the form of repressed emotional junk have been evacuated in the process. Thus the purification of the unconscious continues till divine union is discovered.

such as a parent. The pain of rejection, which the emotions have stored in the unconscious and which is reactivated by every new rejection in life, is projected onto the therapist, who reflects back the acceptance that we did not adequately experience in childhood. This heals the emotional wounds in a way that no amount of theological reflection can do. The emotions do not obey reason. They need reassurance in the area and in the measure in which they felt deprived. Almost everyone has a residue of emotional pain for the affection and security that as infants we needed and felt deprived of.

Deep rest is not only the result of freedom from attachments or aversions to thoughts, but also the feeling of being accepted and loved by the divine Mystery that we sense within us and that Christian doctrine calls the Divine Indwelling. In other words, our awareness of the divine presence begins to reawaken.

Rest grows deeper as our trust in God deepens, and the emotional doubts about our self-worth, impressed upon us in early childhood by various rejections or excessive competition with other siblings, begin to relax. Because the rest is so profound, the body rests as never before. The body is the storehouse of the emotional pain of early life as well as the consequences of trying to deal with that pain through coping mechanisms such as repression and compensatory activity. As a result, the hardpan of defense mechanisms around the emotional weeds of a lifetime begins to soften, the body's extraordinary capacity for health revives, and the psyche begins to release its waste materials. Our awareness during prayer becomes a channel of evacuation similar to the evacuation channels of the physical body. The psyche then starts to disgorge the undigested emotional material of a lifetime in what might be called an attack of "psychic nausea." Early emotional traumas were never fully digested, integrated, or evacuated because as infants and children we could not articulate our pain. We could not speak yet, or if we could, we did not have the

language or the courage needed to express what we felt. Unarticulated emotional experiences that are traumatizing may be pushed into the unconscious where their energy remains. Emotions are energy. They can only be dissipated by acknowledging or articulating them.

I call this third moment in the circular movement of Centering Prayer "the unloading of the unconscious." "Unloading" refers to the experience of psychic nausea that occurs in the form of a bombardment of thoughts and feelings that surge into our awareness without any relationship to the immediate past. That lack of connection with the source of painful thoughts or feelings is what identifies them as coming from our unconscious. Evacuation of this primitive material is the fourth moment of the circle. Having carried this emotional pain for twenty or thirty years (or longer), the evacuation process may be extremely painful, but if it is prepared for by the discipline of a practice like Centering Prayer on a daily basis, then the trust in the Divine Therapist is there to enable us to handle it. We just have to put up with the turbulence; when it is possible to return to the sacred word, we return to it and start the circular process once again.

This unloading process may take place for some people rather soon after starting Centering Prayer, but usually not in a dramatic way. The Spirit seems to start from the outside and work inward. But if there is an outside stimulus, the process may be more immediate and intense. Tragedy, accident, or psychotherapy may have loosened up this material so that some of it may be close to the surface of our awareness. In this case, a single period of Centering Prayer might provide enough rest for this material to break through our defenses and to come to full awareness. Jesus makes a strong point in the gospel that the Kingdom of God is active precisely in circumstances that from our point of view are unacceptable. Just as Jesus befriended the outcasts of society, so he befriends us in these moments of psychological unloading and tries to reassure us that what

has come to consciousness is for our healing and that seeing it is not going to kill us. Therapists, I presume, try to make their clients well, and sometimes this involves bringing up a painful issue. Every now and then the therapist gets tired of waiting for us and says, "Let's take up your distressing relationship with so and so." And we respond, "Let's wait until next week." Similarly, when the Divine Therapist suggests, "Let's take a look at that disturbing feeling and where it comes from," we get spooked and think there must be a better way of getting to heaven. We bury our noses in some devotional book or practice, in work, entertainment, or some other preoccupying activity in order to avoid facing the real issues. But if we persist in the practice of Centering Prayer, the real issues will reassert themselves, and eventually our growing trust in God enables us to endure the healing process. (Much the same dynamic occurs when two people truly love each other.)

Where are we after having made the full circle? We are never where we started because now we have unloaded that which was stuck somewhere in the body. We might conceive of God as our deepest center and our true self as a circle around it (see Diagram 4 on page 67). Our normal consciousness, as we saw, directs our attention to the circumference of our awareness where it is dominated by events and our reactions to them. Like someone at the movies, we get so absorbed in the story that we identify with the characters and may even forget that we are in the theater. Our normal psychological state is being dominated by life's events and our reactions to them. We do not realize that external events and other people influence our worldview and predispose our choices.

Centering Prayer practice is the reverse. It is like going to a bad movie where, because we do not identify with the actors, we know we are in the theater and can get up and leave any time. But if we are attached to preconceived ideas and prepackaged values, it does not occur to us to get up and leave. We have not yet awakened to the fact that at the

level of our spiritual self we are only witnessing what is going on in our lives and are not captive to the plot.

Thus, to return to Diagram 5 (page 77), whenever a certain amount of emotional pain is evacuated, interior space opens up within us. We are closer to the spiritual level of our being, closer to our true self, and closer to the Source of our being, which lies in our inmost center but is buried under the emotional debris of a lifetime. We are closer to God because through the process of unloading we have evacuated some of the material that was hiding the divine presence. Thus, when in prayer we start the circular motion again, we are closer to our center. As a consequence, there is deeper rest. This inevitably causes more unloading of emotional junk — up it comes in the form of primitive emotions or emotionally charged thoughts that bear no relation to the recent past. When the storm subsides, we return to the sacred word. We are closer to our center as we start the process again. This circular movement of rest, unloading in the form of emotionally charged thoughts and primitive emotions, and returning to the sacred word is constantly bringing us closer to our center. So the circular motion in fact turns out to be a dynamic process resembling a spiral staircase.

The unloading process can manifest itself first in physical symptoms like a little pain somewhere in the body, a twitch, or an itch. An emotional knot that is close to the surface of the body may be unwinding. By temporarily directing one's attention to that place, the discomfort usually dissipates rather rapidly.

When a certain number of superficial knots have been evacuated through the deep rest of prayer, the Spirit goes to work on more interior stuff. We may then experience a flow of tears. Most people have repressed a lot of grief in their lives for cultural or personal reasons. Now the body feels for the first time the freedom to do what was previously denied it. Similarly, in the beginning of practicing Centering Prayer, if we are exhausted, the body calls for sleep. This is

not the purpose of prayer, but the body, if it is allowed to do what it has been forbidden to do, feels much better. When we are sufficiently rested, we will not fall asleep so often — unless, of course, we continue making the same exhausting mistakes in our emotional lives.

As the emotions normalize, grief seems to be one of the first to be released, and that can bring a flood of tears. For cultural reasons men are a little slower than women at getting to this point. Tears are something that the early Desert Fathers prayed for because they had the insight to realize, without knowing the psychology of it, that tears open the heart, soften harsh feelings, and wash away bitterness. They are a precious gift. What is surprising for people, if they are not aware of this process, is that the tears do not come from any recent grief they can identify. To complete my discussion of Diagram 5, if we keep up our practice — and I emphasize *doing* it, not feeling it — the rest does the rest! We keep returning, resting, evacuating more junk, enjoying more interior freedom. If we live long enough, we will come to the Center.

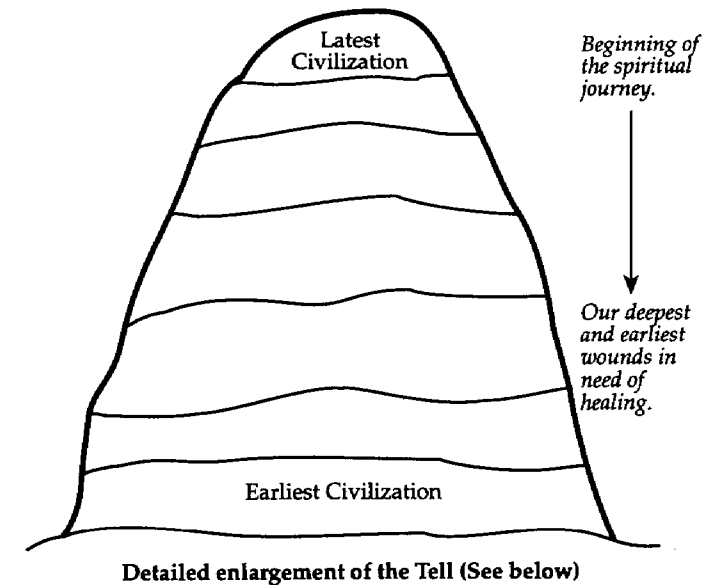
What happens when we hit the Center? Since there is no more junk left to hide the divine presence, I presume we are in divine union. Faith believes that God is waiting for us. Such is the meaning of the Divine Indwelling. If we just keep up our practice, the divine presence cannot remain hidden forever.

To understand this process in its vertical dimension, I like to use the analogy of a middle Eastern tell, that archaeologist's delight (see Diagram 6). It seems that in ancient times when a city-state would overcome an adversary, the military would burn it down and build their own town on top of the old one. As a result, we find one civilization built on another in the same place. Tells were ignored for centuries because people thought they were just hills. Now they are considered archaeological treasures.

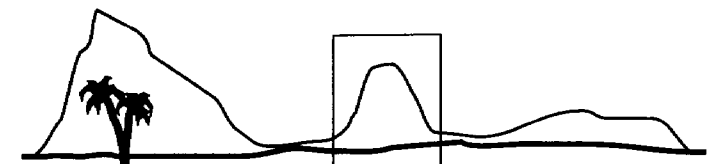
The first job for the archaeologists is to clean off the top of the tell and get rid of the weeds and rocks and un-

Diagram 6

THE ANALOGY OF THE TELL AND THE ARCHEOLOGICAL DIG



Detailed enlargement of the Tell (See below)



The Tell rising up from the plain.

earth the last civilization that thrived there. They throw out the ashes and debris and send the mosaics and pottery to the British Museum. Then they take time off, enjoy the reward of their discoveries, gather together some graduate students from some big university, raise money from some humanitarian foundation, and come back and dig up the next city-state. The process takes many years. Level by level, the archaeologists work down, culture by culture, all the way down to the stone age. As a result of this research we have a much more comprehensive view of the literal meaning of the texts of Scripture. Archaeologists have discovered sacred writings as well as business transactions, enabling scholars to reconstruct many aspects of those early civilizations.

I suggest that the Holy Spirit, as the divine archaeologist, works in a somewhat similar mode. She picks us up where we are now, whatever our chronological age. The first thing is to heal the most destructive aspects of our present relationships and addictive behaviors. As a result, we enjoy a certain freedom in practicing virtue and doing good to others. A personal relationship with Christ forms. We may experience enthusiasm for Scripture. Our devotional life, the sacraments, the liturgy, spiritual reading, ministry, all begin to flourish. This period is often called "the springtime of the spiritual journey." I suppose born-again Christians have a similar experience. The mistake would be to think that the journey is over. It has not even begun. This is just the first stage. But this stage is so delightful that people are reluctant to let go of it.

At some point, the Spirit may decide that the springtime has lasted long enough. In monastic life, we call it "the fervor of novices." The Spirit decides to dig down to the next level. Actually, the Spirit intends to investigate our whole life history, layer by layer, throwing out the junk and preserving the values that were appropriate to each stage of our human development. Without following an exact chronology, the Spirit seems to work back through the

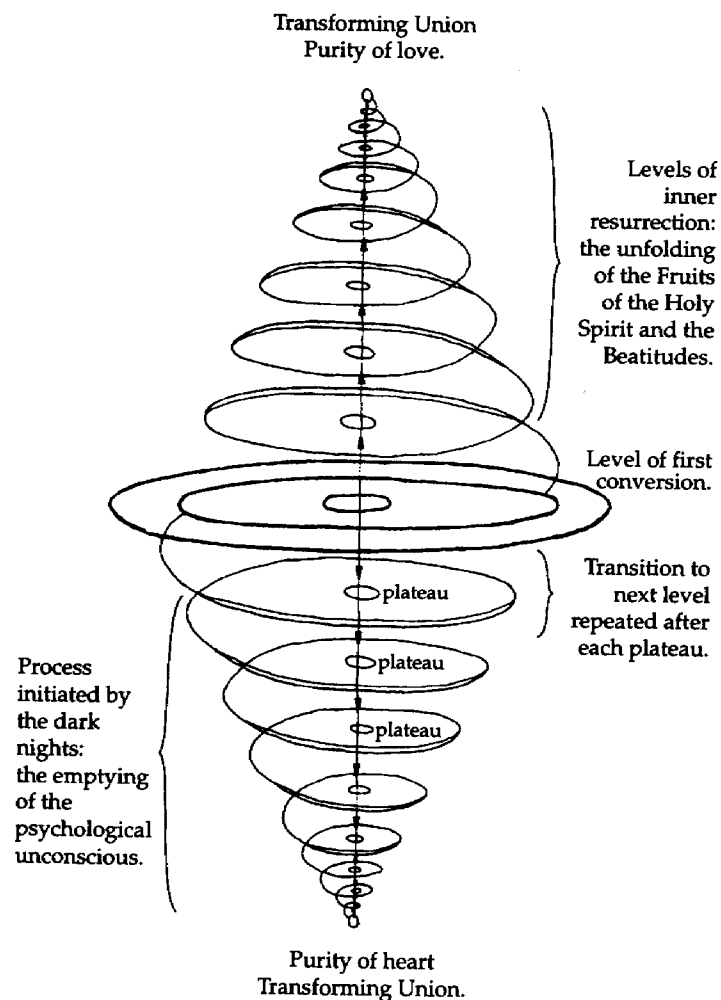
successive stages of our lives: old age (if we have arrived there), mid-life crisis, early adult life, late adolescence, early adolescence, puberty, late childhood, early childhood, infancy, birth, and even prebirth. The sequence corresponds in general to the *emotional* chronology of our psyche, in which the deepest and earliest wounds tend to be the most tightly repressed. Eventually the Spirit begins to dig into the bedrock of our earliest emotional life, where the feelings of rejection, insecurity, lack of affection, or actual physical trauma were first experienced. The most primitive emotions arise to consciousness because raw anger, fear, and grief were our only possible responses at that time. Hence, as we progress toward the center where God actually is waiting for us, we are naturally going to feel that we are getting worse. This warns us that the spiritual journey is not a success story or a career move. It is rather a series of humiliations of the false self. It is experienced as diminutions of the false self with the value system and worldview that we built up so painstakingly as defenses to cope with the emotional pain of early life.

This is a dynamic experience and cannot be captured exactly in these static diagrams, but there is one other diagram that might be helpful (see Diagram 7). The spiral staircase is a combination of the horizontal and vertical diagrams. The top of the staircase corresponds to our first conversion, the time when we first commit ourselves to a life of prayer. At that time we usually have to deal with some particular set of temptations, failures, addictions, or compulsions. The springtime of the spiritual journey lays that unmanageable situation to rest temporarily because of the new values that explode in a burst of spiritual enthusiasm. Flowers may cover a dung heap because of seeds that were dropped there. Our experience then will be of flowers rather than of what lies beneath. The movement from springtime into the real work of the spiritual journey takes place not on our initiative, because we probably would stay in our first fervor forever if we could. The Spirit as our lov-

Diagram 7

THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE

(Combining the horizontal and vertical diagrams in their dynamic unity.)



ing therapist invites us to look at the next level of our life and to see if that, too, can be rescued from its limitations.

At this point, the initial graces that were given to our rational faculties and emotions are withdrawn — a classic experience in the spiritual journey known as “the dark night of sense.” Our enthusiasm for various devotional practices and activities disappears because God no longer gives the grace that works through the levels of reason and emotion. God, too, seems to withdraw, to our great distress or consternation. Instead of being present during our time of prayer, God seems not to show up anymore; it feels as if God could not care less. This is especially painful if the former relationship was very satisfying, exciting, or consoling. The thought rises, “God has abandoned me!” When the dryness is extreme, *Lectio Divina* is like reading the telephone book and spiritual exercises are just a bore. We are irritable and discouraged because the light of our life has gone out. It took so many years to find God and now God has gone away. There is a constant temptation to think we have done something wrong, but we can’t figure out what it was. Our tendency is to project onto God the way we would feel in a similar deteriorating relationship with another human being, namely, hopeless. This judgment is most unfair to God. At this point a lot of people throw in the towel and decide, “The spiritual journey is not for me.”

As the transition to the next layer takes place, there may be a discouraging sense that all is ending, and in a sense, it *is* the end of our world. But our world is not *the* world; it is just one of them. God cannot possibly go away. It is true, our relationship with God, if we deliberately walk away, can be injured for a while, but God does not really leave us. If God did, we would just disappear or turn into a grease spot, since God is the very life of our being.

Creation is ongoing. What God has done in this situation is simply to “go downstairs” to a more intimate place on the spiral staircase, where he is waiting for us to join him

at a new level of maturity and trust. If we are very quiet in the night of sense, St. John of the Cross writes, we may notice a delicate sense of peace and may even begin to enjoy the more substantial food of pure faith. As we let go of the level on which we formerly found satisfaction, we move to a deeper level of faith, which is far more reliable and much more strengthening for the journey.

The Fathers of the Church allegorized this basic experience as the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. The biblical desert is the symbol of the purification of the various stages of our personal life history. Purification is never the rejection of anything, but the sifting of the wheat from the chaff. It is a kind of judgment in which the Spirit sifts what was good from what was harmful at each stage of our development and gathers the wheat into barns while the limitations that were built into each stage of our early development are left behind. Thus the awe and wonder of the infant is recaptured; only the ignorance and tantrums of the child are left behind. The adventurous spirit of the adolescent remains, but without the emotional turmoil and desperate search for self-identity that belongs to that period of life.

When we connect with the divine presence waiting for us on the level below, we experience freedom from the limited ideas we had of God, and our spiritual journey blossoms again; we have reached a plateau, a whole new spiritual perspective. Of course, we get overattached to this place too, and so after a little respite, the Spirit suggests, "Let's look at the next level," and we are plunged into another transition or dark night.

What is most disconcerting for souls who have been on the journey for twenty or thirty years is that each time we make the transition from one level to the next, we are likely to encounter the same temptations we had before we started the journey, and we think, "I'm not getting anywhere; I'm just the same old stick." We may even think all is over or that we made a mistake to start the journey. Those

commentaries are from our prerecorded memory bank and are just baloney.

What can we say about the distress that arises when the same old temptations recur? For example, difficulties with a particular person that we thought we had resolved once and for all recycle. In actual fact, it is not the same temptation at all. We encounter it again because there is a circular structure to a spiral staircase and hence horizontally we seem to meet the same old problem. But vertically we are now dealing with it at a more mature level. Hence, we are capable of making a more complete surrender of that attachment or that aversion. If the Spirit asked us in the beginning to make a total surrender of every difficult person or situation, nobody could do it. By leading us gradually (the way human things work), through growth in trust and humility, we are able to make an ever deeper surrender of ourselves to God. In this way we reach a new level of interior freedom, a deeper purity of heart, and an ever increasing union with the Spirit.

If God did not seem to disappear, how many of us would keep going? God is always one step ahead of us in this journey toward the center. Just as we think we have found him, he slips out of our grasp. The worst thing that can happen to us is to settle in an oasis under a palm tree. Growth is the challenge of the gospel. The great sin in the New Testament is to refuse to grow and to choose to stay as we are. The spiritual life is dynamic. The Spirit keeps inviting us to new levels of surrender, faith, and love.

The Divine Therapist continues the treatment in daily life. God brings people and events into our lives and takes them out again to show us other things we need to see about ourselves. Thus contemplative prayer and daily life work together if we are willing, and mutually reinforce the therapeutic process.

What happens when we come to the bottom of the spiral staircase and fully access the divine presence? It will be a great surprise and not like anything we expected. All the

things we valued to reach that state will be seen in a new light and many former convictions may be shattered.

Every time we go down in this process (using the spiral model), we also move in the opposite direction by accessing a new level of freedom and growth in faith, hope, and charity under the influence of the Spirit (see Diagram 7). Every level down is also a level up and releases our creative energy. The humiliation of the false self leads to humility and humility leads to invincible trust. The fruits of the Spirit enumerated in Galatians 5:22-23 begin to appear and later the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-10).

The transforming union seems to involve reappropriating every stage of our life, not with its details, but by reliving the values of each stage of life. We may realize that some of the things we rejected early in the spiritual journey were the result of misinformation. God invites us to take another look at the good things of life and its legitimate pleasures that we might have needlessly rejected. Everything good and of true value in life is reappropriated under the influence of the Spirit. It is as if we were led through our developmental process again, taking possession of the values appropriate to each level or period of life and letting go of the limitations that the human condition and our inability to handle them had imposed on us.

Will we ever come to the point where the false self and all the junk is emptied out? I think this is possible, but that does not mean that the results will be what we expected. On the contrary, the very capacity to love without self-interest is going to increase our capacity for suffering.

The journey, or process itself, is what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. This is a very important point. To accept our illness and whatever damage was done to us in life by people or circumstances is to participate in the cross of Christ and in our own redemption. In other words, the acceptance of our wounds is not only the beginning, but the journey itself. It does not matter if we do not finish it. If we are on the journey, we are in the Kingdom. This seems

to be what Jesus is saying in the parables. It is in bearing our weakness with compassion, patience, and without expecting all our ills to go away that we function best in a Kingdom where the insignificant, the outcasts, and everyday life are the basic coordinates. The Kingdom is in our midst. Our attitude toward reality can go on improving as the Spirit — according to our personal history, determination, and all the other uncertain factors of life — enables us to negotiate the spiral staircase.

Rather than try to identify where we are on the spiral staircase or which dark night we are in, it is better to surrender to the process. The dark nights are helpful guides in a general way, but they take different forms in different people. For those living active lives in the world, external trials may predominate. For those living in solitude, interior trials seem to predominate. Both will certainly be present in some degree. For some people, the dark nights are very clear; for others, not so. Some people seem to be in them for longer periods than others, and some seem to be in and out of them or in both states at once.

Perfection, or holiness, it seems to me, should be measured by our commitment to the spiritual journey with its spiral staircase, rather than by attaining some particular goal. There are breakthroughs along the way, followed by plateaus in which we see our dark side as never before, but with growing serenity and acceptance. During these periods may also come experiences of divine union that then may take years to work into all our faculties, relationships, and bodies. But then the journey continues. We are called to a deeper humility, which in turn calls for a greater trust and an all-encompassing love of God. In a sense, the bottom and the top meet or collapse into one another. Humility and boundless confidence in God's infinite mercy merge, and the ongoing journey becomes whatever God wants it to be.

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